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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ABUJA 000564

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SUBJECT: SENATE PRESIDENT UNDER PRESSURE

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Classified By: Ambassador John Campbell for reason 1.4 (B and D)

11. (C) SUMMARY: Senate President Ken Nnamani says he is under immense pressure from President Obasanjo to manage sensitive debate at the National Assembly in the Executive's favor. Meanwhile, Nnamani continues to say that his objective is to remain neutral and ensure that elections happen on time. With pressure mounting and his relationship with the President becoming strained, Nnamani increasingly finds himself in the middle of two countervailing forces. On one side is the President, who is demanding Nnamani control discussion in the Senate and manage forthcoming legislation in a manner advantageous to the PDP, and on the other hand a Vice President, seemingly excluded from running for office, allied with an increasingly assertive National Assembly, tired of being steamrolled by the President and anxious to leave its mark. With the elections less than a month away, Senator Nnamani is still closely guarding his plans on how he intends to navigate an increasingly fractious political environment in which both sides see the outcome as a zero sum game. End summary

12. (C) Senator Nnamani, and his deputy, Senator Johnathan Zwingina (PDP), shared some of their insights into a variety of critical issues at a short-notice dinner at Nnamani's official residence in Abuja on March 18. Ambassador and Poloff attended the two-hour event in which Senate President Nnamani revealed that his relationship with President Obasanjo was frayed, and the "leadership of the National Assembly would do nothing to compromise the timing of the elections." He also said that the Assembly continued to play an aggressive oversight role with INEC Chairman Maruice Iwu, provided his guests with their assessment of Yar'Adua strengths and weaknesses as president, and described a President caught up in a zero sum competition with the Vice President.

STRAINED RELATIONSHIP WITH PRESIDENT

13. (C) Nnamani said his personal relationship with the President has been strained since the Senate rejected the proposed revision of the constitution. The strain, he said, had become further pronounced since the Petroleum Trust and Development Trust (PTDF) scandal had become public. Nnamani said that he counseled the President to "fix the problem quietly," rather than seek a public forum. The President, he

said, was determined to use the issue to sideline the Vice President, against his advice. The President had bragged that he would be the first to testify, a promise which he couldn't keep, Nnamani said. The scandal has caused the President great harm, and the Vice President raised a stout defense and made new allegations against the President which have not been adequately addressed, Nnamani said.

14. (C) Nnamani revealed that the President is now pressuring him to control the PTDF debate, and had been annoyed that he set up a second committee (which resigned en masse on March 20 in protest of having their reported indictment of the President and Vice President vetted or delayed). He said there was general consensus among those around President Obasanjo that the Nnamani was not dependable and, therefore, he expects damning revelations to be made about him soon in the press, in an attempt to bring him into line. He said the President exhibited a military personality, and expected to give orders which would be implemented without questions. He pointed out that Obasanjo had ignored court orders and had run roughshod over the law. The give and take of democracy was not to President Obasanjo's liking, he said. But the President is deeply concerned about his international image and how he is perceived abroad, he said. Nnamani cited President Obasanjo querying him about his meetings with key members of the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee and his keen awareness of which American politicians he saw as enemies or allies.

DIFFICULTIES WITH IWU AND ELECTIONS

5.(C) Nnamani said that there was little confidence in INEC among his colleagues, but that the elections must hold, and therefore INEC had to held accountable, he said. No mention was made of impeachment or the possibility of a succession plan in which he would take over as president. Nnamani and

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Zwingina expressed concern about the section in the electoral act which stipulated that elections would be delayed and only rescheduled "at the convenience of INEC," if one of the 30 presidential candidates died. "We are concerned that the elections could be delayed by the death of a minor candidate we would only know by name if he died," Nnamani said. Zwingina said that he had tried unsuccessfully to have the clause removed from the electoral law, but was overruled.

16. (C) Sen. Nnamani and Zwingina had hosted a working session with Chairman Iwu on March 12 in their efforts to play an oversight role. The group of about a dozen key National Assembly members had quizzed Iwu on the logistics and plans for elections. At one point Iwu said that the results would not be announced at the polling station. He was subsequently shown the section of the electoral law which stipulated the results did have to be announced at each polling stations, and Iwu acted as if he was surprised to learn this was in the law. The INEC lawyer who was with Iwu, Nnamani said, remained silent.

17. (C) Nnamani said that INEC did not have the right to exclude candidates from the ballot, only the courts. He said he hope that the courts would offer an expedited hearing on the case, but that INEC strategy was to make Atiku "guilty until proven innocent". He expressed confidence that the courts would give both sides a fair hearing and make an independent decision, although it could depend as much on the "judicial calendar" as the "judicial decision," Nnamani said.

18. (C) Nnamani said he thought the President would allow free and fair elections to go forward --- as long as Atiku was not on the ballot. If Atiku was on the ballot, Nnamani suggested, the President and the Vice President would participate in rigging. Atiku, Nnamani continued, is the President's only real threat because Vice President has a political network "down to the local government area" which

is organized and well funded. Thus, Atiku presents a threat to the President's preferred candidate. Senator Zwingina, a two-term Senator from Adamawa state and former strong presidential supporter, now aligned with Atiku, agreed.

¶9. (C) Although Nnamani did not disclose his thinking on the pending controversy on the PTDF report or impeachment, which could result from actions initiated by a negative report, he did suggest that there was a window of opportunity for legislative action following elections. Nnamani noted that President Obasanjo would leave office on May 29, and the NASS would have two additional weeks before its mandate ended. He suggested that any outstanding issues might be dealt with at that time.

YAR'ADUA: RUMORS OF CONTINUED ILL HEALTH

¶10. (C) Nnamani and Zwingina both agreed that Yar'Adua's health problems had worsened and that he was now on dialysis three times a week since his return from Germany. In addition, Zwingina repeated a often heard rumor about mental health problems which reportedly runs in Yar'Adua's family. They both agreed that Yar'Adua was a reluctant candidate, and that he had originally planned to return to teaching at the university and then complete his doctorate. His family, especially his mother, was opposed to him running for president, but President Obasanjo had implored him saying, "your country needs you," he quoted Obasanjo as saying.

¶11. (C) Yar'Adua, they both agreed, was an "introvert" and would have a hard time running a country as fractious as Nigeria. He had made only a minimal effort to get to know his political peers and he only attended a handful of meeting of the governors in eight years. Zwingina said even Yar'Adua's friends had to concede that he had not attended funerals or made condolence visits to neighboring states, even when a major plane crash occurred killing numerous notables. Zwingina said he would often stay in his room for 10 days at a time while governor of Katsina. Thus, even in his own state he remained largely unknown.

¶12. (C) Because of the serious health issues, the two Senators agreed, the choice of Yar'Adua has not been greeted warmly in the North. The consensus, they said, was that this was seen as a way for the South to gain the presidency. In addition, his health, if he is elected, would limit not only

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his domestic politicking, but also Nigeria's international politicking in which Nigeria's president played a leadership role at key institutions at the regional, continental and international levels.

¶13. (C) Absent the serious health conditions, the two Senators agreed, Yar'Adua would make a fine president. An austere, honest, college graduate who is serious and intelligent, Yar'Adua had, potentially, "the makings of Nigeria's best president ever". But his health condition was a serious handicap. The specter of death would be ever-present, creating a climate of great political uncertainty.

¶14. (C) Comment: Senator Nnamani is under pressure by both the President and his allies, as well as by the President's detractors at the National Assembly. He has consistently played his cards close to his vest and he appears to be employing the same strategy with the potentially explosive issues of impeachment and the PTDF scandal. With both sides seeing the issue as a zero sum game, it is unclear how much longer Nnamani, who told us he is headed to the US on March 22 "on business," can play the role of a strictly non-partisan and neutral referee.

CAMPBELL